

Local Government of the Future Subcommittee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Tuesday, February 23, 2021

Note: This document is ACIR staff notes written during this subcommittee meeting. It is a public document and has been provided to meeting participants for their review and revised in accordance with any comments received but is not approved minutes of the meeting.

An audio recording is available at:

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/ACIR/Meetings/2021/2021-02-23_ACIR_LGF_telemeeting.mp3

Members present:

Debra Borrero (alt.), Maureen Brummett, Kathy Demsey, John Filchak, Brian Greenleaf, Rick Hart, Marcia Leclerc, Brian O'Connor (alt.), Lon Seidman, Brendan Sharkey (Chair), Lyle Wray (Vice-Chair)

Other Participants: Leah Grenier (alt.), Zak Leavy, Sheila McKay, Danny Medress, Teri Merisotis, Richard Porth, Fran Rabinowitz, Orlando Rodriguez, Ray Rossomando, C.J. Strand, Susan Heller Williams

ACIR staff: Bruce Wittchen

1. Call to order

Commission chair Sharkey asked everyone to introduce themselves and called the meeting to order, noting it will be recorded.

2. Acknowledgement of 1/26/2021 meeting notes

Commission chair Sharkey pointed out that the subcommittee decided last month to not approve minutes and to make meeting notes available instead. Bruce Wittchen explained that he had circulated a draft of his notes to everyone who attended last month's meeting, so people had an opportunity to correct anything, and he will post those notes online as if they were minutes.

3. Discussion of Local Government of the Future initiative

Commission chair Sharkey described this month's ACIR discussion of the [Blueprint to Transform Connecticut's Public Schools](#) prepared by the [CT Assoc. of Public School Superintendents](#) (CAPSS). The ACIR decided to refer it to this subcommittee and the goal is to decide whether to support it and how. He added that the devil is in the details. He asked Fran Rabinowitz, executive director of CAPSS, to provide a brief summary and said the subcommittee must consider the pros and cons, and the potential landmines.

Ms Rabinowitz said work on this proposal began in 2018, when a number of municipalities experienced reductions in state [education cost sharing](#) (ECS). Rather than look only at ECS, they are looking at funding, programming, accountability, and other issues. The blueprint proposes that the foundation of ECS be raised and a 2.5% annual increase in ECS for the next 15 years. Superintendents support the proposal and Ms Rabinowitz highlighted the need to also address structural racism and implicit bias.

Ms Rabinowitz said the rapid increase in special education costs is another concern, but the blueprint is broader. She has spoken with Rosa DeLauro about federal funding. The blueprint also calls for a better evaluation system and mechanism for bringing in new teachers. It addresses school board conduct and ethics. She pointed out that it also affects schools when funding is not available for towns. The

blueprint calls for better ways to work with English language learners and also calls for no further magnet schools until the funding is figured out.

The blueprint also identifies options for regional solutions and Ms Rabinowitz highlighted that they will not succeed with all these recommendations. She said 200 education bills have been introduced this session and many address points raised in the blueprint. CAPSS is willing to negotiate any of the points. There was a discussion of the reception to the blueprint and Ms Rabinowitz said there is interest, but no one has moved it forward as a legislative concept. There was further discussion of CAPSS's efforts to build a coalition and of the possibility of using federal COVID relief funding to implement the blueprint.

Ms Rabinowitz said federal funding is badly needed at the districts and mentioned an approaching funding cliff. She will testify at an upcoming [Appropriations Committee](#) hearing and said the blueprint is reasonable and we can live with it and fund it. There was a question about special education costs and Ms Rabinowitz said the excess costs of special education should be fully funded. She added that there should be carrots to encourage regional solutions as an alternative to sending students to private facilities. There was further discussion of special education issues, including the burden of proof. Commission member Brummett said greater predictability would help school districts in planning.

Teri Merisotis asked if Ms Rabinowitz can meet with the [American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT). Ms Rabinowitz said she will and mentioned others she has met with. There was a discussion of blueprint priorities and the level of support it has received. Ms Rabinowitz offered to provide a list of priorities. Commission member Seidman mentioned that regional approaches are not limited to [Regional Education Service Centers](#) (RESCs); local school districts can work together. There are a lot of opportunities. Ms Rabinowitz agreed and said that is especially important for smaller districts.

Commission alternate O'Connor asked about the significant increase in special education and Ms. Rabinowitz said students are being placed in special education without having received intervention at the classroom level. Schools are over-identifying because they have not intervened; the legislature has been asked to form a group to look into this. She also said there also are higher costs for children in private facilities and added that children are not different than they had been in 2011.

There was a discussion of regional approaches and it was noted that parents do not want their children out of their district. Ms Rabinowitz described the approach taken in Bridgeport, where a student can return to the classroom without a special education designation. She noted that she is not sure the right thing is being done for all who are designated.

Commission member Demsey said CAPSS has shared its ideas with the [state Dept. of Education](#) (SDE) and OPM and the Governor and legislature will decide what can be funded. She said the question is what the state would like to see as the outcome for increased funding. She said districts vary and added that there is almost \$10 billion of spending per year but some students are left behind. Commission member Demsey noted that there are three years of [Uniform Chart of Accounts](#) data and where are the successes? She mentioned an education funding trial where someone testified about a terrific program, but it wasn't changing outcomes. We need to ensure resources are used well. She also mentioned a concern regarding the burden of proof for special education.

Commission alternate Borrero noted that she represents the RESC Alliance, which wholeheartedly supports a majority of the blueprint recommendations. She mentioned there also is a concern about school sustainability. Commission member Greenleaf said the blueprint is a great base level document and asked to see the blueprint's Gantt chart. He also said the state could incentivize districts to keep special education students in the district districts with capacity could tuition in students from neighboring districts.

Commission chair Sharkey asked Commission member Greenleaf about the applicability of language developed by the ACIR in [HB 6448](#) that can incentivize school districts to develop a regional approach. Commission member Greenleaf said it depends on context. He explained that some of his districts students are in CREC's autism program, but there are other needs. He also noted the space issues in a growing town. Commission member Filchak said this reminds him of discussions at the [Municipal Opportunities and Regional Efficiencies](#) (MORE) Commission comparing local and regional approaches to special education. Each approach has benefits.

Commission chair Sharkey asked what is next; is the subcommittee ready to endorse the blueprint in concept? Commission alternate said he is not ready to endorse the entire package today. Commission alternate Borrero suggested the subcommittee look at the priorities and vote on that. Commission chair Sharkey noted the blueprint has 30 recommendations and mentioned CAPSS's Gantt chart; the subcommittee can go through this now or at another meeting, noting the full ACIR will meet next week.

Commission member Leclerc suggested a heat map approach identifying points having the biggest impact. Those should be highlighted and the group should focus on them. Commission chair Sharkey said another option is to prioritize the re-imagining of what can be done with federal funding. There was a discussion of issues associated with federal funding, including strings being attached and not knowing when funding will be pulled away.

Commission member Brummett said federal [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#) (ESSER) funds must enhance programs, not backfill to make up for funding shortfalls. She said a needs assessment must be complete by the end of March. Commission member Demsey said CAPSS has helped with the needs assessment and described eligible and ineligible categories.

Commission member Sharkey asked Ms. Rabinowitz about identifying activities recommended in the blueprint that would be eligible for such funds. Ms Rabinowitz said many of the recommended actions would be eligible for COVID relief funds but noted long-term funding concerns. She said the state's 41% share of education funding is low by national standards and she expects federal COVID funding to be directed to the states, but it could fund blueprint actions.

Commission chair Sharkey recommended fine-tuning the blueprint to focus on what can be done with short-term funding. Commission member Demsey noted that most districts will receive less than \$200,000. The top ten will receive the vast majority of funding and some others will receive as little as \$39,000. Ms Rabinowitz said that is why CAPSS's focus is on the expected stimulus funds being directed to states. There was further discussion of funding and of pending education legislation. Ms Rabinowitz said she can provide CAPSS's chart of education bills and their relationship with recommendations in the blueprint. Many of the blueprint's recommendations already are in bills.

There was further discussion of perspectives on the blueprint and Ms Rabinowitz said she had to leave for another meeting, but will look at blueprint recommendations with respect to their eligibility for federal funding. Commission chair Sharkey said prioritizing the blueprint to work with federal funding can provide something to get behind. Commission member Brummett said she will send an updated blueprint-legislation crosswalk. There was further discussion of next steps and the group decided to hold a special meeting next Tuesday (March 2) at the same time.

4. Next steps

There was no further discussion of next steps.

5. Adjourn

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting and the meeting was adjourned at 12:02.

Notes prepared by Bruce Wittchen, OPM